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ABSTRACT

Effective schools have staffs that stress the importance of educational goals and have a well-defined mission. They also clearly communicate the expectation that all students can and will reach the stated goals. Reviews of studies of exemplary schools find that the principals express high expectations for both teacher and student performance, while the teachers have high expectations for their students. Effective schools have a climate conducive to student attainment, whereas declining schools project a negative climate and a belief that students cannot attain educational goals. An orderly learning environment is another important factor in effective schools and further reflects a positive school attitude and climate. The most consistent finding in school effectiveness research is the importance of the principal's strong leadership role. The principal sets the tone for the school and reinforces the positive school climate. Since schools are distinguished by a complex set of cultural processes, the modification of this "culture" in ineffective schools is not a simple matter. One effective method for improvement is the use of organizational development techniques specifically designed to alter the norms of an organization. Behavior modification techniques can also be used to alter a school's norms. A body of literature geared to the "cultural" view of school change has recently emerged; "Creating Effective Schools" by Wilbur Brookover is recommended to school principals as a source of guidelines for improving a school. (MD)

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Each *Research Action Brief* reports the findings of significant empirical research studies on a topic in educational management. From these findings implications are drawn for the operation of today's schools, thus serving as a guide for enlightened administrative action.

This *Research Action Brief* was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management for distribution by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

The Culture of an Effective School

In recent years, educational researchers have turned their attention to the broad sociological processes at work in schools. Here they are uncovering the outlines of a comprehensive theory of school effectiveness — one that is closely related to the concept of "school climate."

This emerging theory proposes that a school's success is determined in large part by the underlying structure of norms, expectations, and beliefs in the school. Like an individual's self-concept, this pervasive climate exerts a powerful influence on the behavior of school members and ultimately determines a school's success.

In the sections below, several of the most important traits that researchers have found to determine a school's "climate for success" are explored. A final section suggests how an understanding of what sociologists call the "norm-behavior cycle" can help practitioners improve school effectiveness.

Goals and Expectations

Not surprisingly, researchers have found that the staffs of effective or improving schools strongly stress the importance of educational objectives, particularly in mathematics and reading. What *is* surprising, perhaps, is that the particular details of the objectives seem less important than the strength with which they are emphasized.

As researcher Ronald Edmonds explained it, "Any organization is more cohesive if all parties understand its major purpose." In schools, continually stressing educational goals communicates the idea to all school members that, above all else, the school is a place for learning.

The existence of broadly understood educational goals in effective schools has been noted by several educational researchers. For example, Wilbur Brookover and Lawrence Lezotte studied six Michigan schools in which pupil performance was improving and two in which performance was declining. "The improving schools are clearly different from the declining schools in the emphasis their staff places on the accomplishment of the basic reading and mathematics objectives," they concluded. "The improving schools accept and emphasize the importance of these goals and objectives, while the declining schools give much less emphasis to such objectives and do not specify them as fundamental."

A recent Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) study of successful urban elementary schools came to a similar conclusion. The effective schools studied were characterized by "clearly stated curricular goals" and "a well-defined mission, one that [was] consistently specified across participant groups."

Many or most public schools currently operate with vague, abstract, or assumed goals. In addition, both the larger society and educators themselves pressure schools to attain multiple and often conflicting goals. "As a result," says the PDK, "resources are diffused and no goal is attained." This dispersion of energy, though, can apparently be prevented by defining and then strongly adhering to a small number of academic goals. This central core of goals provides the framework for all other school activities.

Effective schools not only stress educational goals; they

clearly communicate the expectation that all students can and will reach those goals. This climate of high expectations is so pervasive in effective schools that it is scarcely noticed by the school's staff and students. Numerous school researchers, though, have been struck by the "climate for attainment" in these schools.

For example, Edmonds studied effective urban schools, which he defined as those that "bring an equal percentage of [their] highest and lowest social classes to minimum mastery." Among the primary characteristics of effective schools he found were "teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery." Gilbert Austin reviewed studies of exemplary schools in four states and found that such schools had principals who expressed high expectations for both teacher and student performance and teachers who held high expectations for their students.

Brookover and Lezotte noticed a "clear contrast" in the attitudes of school staffs in improving and declining schools. "The staffs of the improving schools tend to believe that *all* of their students can master the basic objectives and, furthermore, the teachers perceive that the principal shares this belief." Teachers in declining schools, on the other hand, "project the belief that students' ability levels are low" and that they cannot attain the educational objectives. In addition, the staff of the improving schools tended to believe that many of their students would complete high school or college, whereas teachers in declining schools had low expectations in this regard.

Of course, it could be argued that the teachers in the declining schools were simply being realistic, and indeed this may have been so. And the teachers in the improving schools *did* have something to be optimistic about — their students were, after all, improving.

This argument sheds light on the deeper processes occurring in these schools — those involving the self-reinforcing norm-behavior cycles that operate in all social groups. Every organization develops norms of behavior that dictate how members of the organization are expected to behave. Each individual learns, through interacting with others, just what is considered appropriate behavior and what is not. When a person behaves in accordance with the norms, the norms are confirmed and reinforced.

In this kind of cyclical fashion, norms reinforce and perpetuate themselves. And the behavior that the norms dictate is what creates, in the minds of individuals, the organization's "climate." In the effective schools studied by Brookover and Lezotte, improving student achievement was the norm, and the schools as a result had a climate conducive to attainment. A similar spiral of norms and behaviors was at work in the declining schools — only it was headed in the opposite direction.

How to intervene in the apparently seamless norm-behavior cycle is, of course, the problem. This topic will be discussed more fully in the final section of this paper.

Orderly Learning Environment

Recent research has confirmed another intuitive notion of educators everywhere: students learn better in a secure, orderly, and nondisruptive environment. In a disruptive school setting, as some researchers explain it, the "lower" parts of students' brains are more active, stimulated as they are by social challenges, physical threats, and the like. An orderly and controlled environment, on the other hand, allows the neocortex to function efficiently, thus facilitating the learning of such cerebral subjects as reading and math.

Edmonds found that effective schools had "an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning." Of course, effective schools had disruptions, too, broken windows for example. The important variable, Edmonds explains, isn't the broken windows, it's "how long the windows stay broken." In other words, it's the extent to which there is "tangible evidence of institutional neglect."

Again, the attitudes of the school's staff members and the prevailing norms are all important. In effective schools, Edmonds continues, "all teachers take responsibility for all students, all the time, everywhere in the school," thus producing a more orderly environment. In ineffective schools, teachers tend to "disclaim responsibility for any activity outside their classroom."

Maintaining the learning environment also extends to other areas of administrative and classroom policy. A study by Jane Stallings and Georgea Mohlman, for example, found that consistently enforced policies on school attendance not only reduced tardiness and absence rates, but also helped generate a climate of high academic expectations. Another study reported by these researchers found that when instructional time in reading was "protected" by such actions as restricting announcements over the P.A. system, students scored higher on reading tests. Such policies help promote the norm that learning is the highest priority in the school.

Another element of a stable learning environment is a low rate of teacher turnover. R. Gary Bridge and colleagues reviewed three studies examining this issue and concluded, not surprisingly, that "teacher turnover is negatively related to both verbal and mathematics achievement." Of course, the chain of cause-and-effect is again cyclic: "teachers in a district or school of low-achieving students may well become discouraged, and the most discouraged may choose to seek positions elsewhere." The disruption caused by the high turnover rate, in turn, negatively influences student achievement.

Strong Leadership

Probably the most consistent finding of recent school effectiveness research is the important role the school's principal plays in producing high student achievement. "The leadership of the principal is crucial to the school's success with students," states James M. Lipham. "Strong principal leadership" and "strong principal participation in the classroom instructional program" are critical to school success, says Austin. Edmonds identifies "the principal's leadership and attention to the quality of instruction" as a major characteristic of effective schools.

The list of similar findings could go on and on. But what, more specifically, do principals of effective schools do to exert "strong leadership"? First and foremost, such principals "spend most of their time out in the school — usually in the classroom," and "are constantly engaged in identifying and diagnosing instructional problems," says Edmonds. Thus, principals of effective schools are often instructional leaders in the finest sense — but that is not all.

Principals of effective schools are strong in other ways. They are more assertive in their leadership role, according to Brookover and Lezotte, and they are stronger disciplinarians. They assume responsibility for the school's success and "run the school" instead of just letting it run.

But effective principals do not depend solely on the power of their office to dictate behavior. Given the fact that schools are "loosely coupled" organizations — in which lower levels don't necessarily respond to dictates from above — this type of approach would probably be self-defeating anyway. Effective principals *do* appear to use the power of their office in effective ways, but they also attempt to influence the direction of the school through deep involvement in the school's "culture" — that complex web of norms, expectations, and behaviors at the classroom and hallway levels that really determines a school's efficacy.

The importance of the principal in determining school success should come as no surprise. The principal is, after all, the most powerful and prominent individual in the school. As a result, the principal has more influence than any other individual on the norm-behavior cycle in the school. He or she can dictate behavior to some extent in the classrooms and hallways by decree, persuasion, or force. More importantly, though, the principal can strongly influence the norms of the school with his or her own behavior.

The principal sets the most prominent example in the school. Other members of the school community take their behavioral cues from the principal. Thus, if the principal is only an infrequent visitor to the classroom, or is attempting to work wonders while hidden away in the school's office, he or she will reinforce norms of noninvolvement, detachment, and the like. If, however, the principal is often seen in the classrooms or hallways discussing instructional techniques and student progress, he or she will communicate norms of active involvement, taking responsibility, and instructional focus.

In short, the principal sets the tone of the school. As the research discussed above indicates, principals of effective schools are not only dedicated to instructional improvement, they display their dedication by direct and meaningful involvement in the nitty-gritty of classroom instruction. As a result, they reinforce the norm that every student can and will achieve the school's academic goals.

Implications

The previous sections have shown that effective schools differ from ineffective or average schools in that they strongly emphasize academic goals; communicate the expectation that all students can and will meet those goals; maintain an orderly, secure, but nonrepressive learning environment; and have a principal who is both an effective school manager and an instructional leader.

Suggestions for making schools more effective would seem to follow directly: define and strongly emphasize educational goals, maintain an orderly school, and so forth. This seemingly rational approach, though, is somewhat like treating the symptoms of an illness while ignoring its underlying causes. While such administrative action would have some remedial and palliative effect, the underlying norms and values that influence school success would go largely untreated.

A more promising approach, as Stewart Purkey and Marshall Smith state, "rests on the conception of schools as functioning social systems with distinctive cultures in which the improvement effort is directed toward incremental, long-term cultural change." An effective school in this conception is "distinguished by its culture: a structure, process, and

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climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning."

The obvious next question remains: How, exactly, does a principal or other change agent go about modifying this underlying "culture" of values and norms that seems to have such a pervasive influence on school effectiveness?

One recently developed approach is to use the techniques of organizational development (OD), which are specifically designed to alter the norms of an organization. OD, as explained by Richard Schmuck and colleagues, is basically a strategy for eliciting organizational change that utilizes — at least initially — an outside "cadre" of OD specialists. The specialists educate the members of the organization in such areas as communication skills, problem-solving, conflict resolution, decision-making, and goal identification. They attempt to get the members of the organization "to examine their communication patterns, their customary ways of working together in meetings, or the ways in which people are linked together to get their daily work done."

By the time an OD intervention is complete, state Schmuck and colleagues, "cognitive and affective change should have occurred; norms, roles, influence patterns, and communication networks should have become more receptive and responsive — indeed, the very culture of the school should have become different."

OD appears to be a powerful method for effecting change in organizational climate because it intervenes in the norm-behavior cycle and sets it on a new track. Although OD is best carried out with the help of specialists, many OD techniques and exercises (as found in Schmuck's book) can be used without special training.

Besides specially developed OD strategies, administrators can use classical behavior-modification techniques to begin altering the norms of a school. Briefly, this involves encouraging behavior consistent with new norms and discouraging behavior supporting unwanted norms, while clearly communicating just what the new norms should be. This, like all successful change efforts, may require months or even years. Old norms, like crabgrass, go away only with consistent effort over a long period.

Finally, a body of practitioner oriented literature specifically geared to the "cultural" view of school change has recently emerged. The most prominent example of this is *Creating Effective Schools* by Brookover and colleagues. This book explains the characteristics of effective schools as identified by research and then provides a set of specific and practical guidelines for systematically improving school success, with special attention to altering a school's underlying climate. Joseph F. Rogus provides a helpful checklist of research findings that principals can use to assess their own and teachers' performance.

According to the research discussed above, then, schools are instructionally effective in large part because they are in the "habit" of being effective; they have developed, by one means or another, a system of norms and accompanying behaviors that breed student success. Despite their deep-rooted nature, these norms can be changed for the better, and it is the principal who can do the most to alter these norms and generate a climate conducive to school success.

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